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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL ABLD KS KN
SUBJECT: FORMER GYEONGGI GOVERNOR SOHN HAK-KYU ON NORTH
KOREA AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Over lunch with the Ambassador on November 3, GNP Presidential hopeful and former Gyeonggi Province Governor Sohn Hak-kyu asked many probing questions about where U.S.-ROK relations were headed and offered his views on North Korea and his assessment of the ROK political scene, including his interpretation of the strategies of his competitors in the race to obtain the GNP's candidacy. Sohn gave a clear indication of his support for the U.S.-ROK alliance, stating that the majority of Koreans were behind the alliance and thanked the Ambassador for U.S. efforts to restart the Six Party Talks. He said the Korean people appreciated how much the U.S. had done for the peace and economic prosperity they now enjoy. Sohn said he thought Koreans were looking for a reform-minded conservative as their next leader and suggested he was just such a candidate.

NORTH KOREA POLICY

¶2. (C) During Sohn's 100-day tour of Korea from July to October, Sohn made three political statements condemning provocative acts by North Korea. Sohn said he supported engagement with the North with the goal of inducing reform and openness through exchanges and economic interaction. He did not, however, think that the ROK should continue to extend goodwill to the North in light of their recent provocative acts. The ROK should stand firmly against the North and express anger at the DPRK's nuclear test. He regretted that because of the Roh administration's reluctance, the ROK had lost an opportunity to improve relations with the U.S. The Ambassador said the U.S. wanted the ROK to take a strong stance in response to the nuclear test, but emphasized that the U.S. was not telling the ROK what to do.

¶3. (C) Because of the poor response by the ROKG to the October 9 nuclear test, Sohn was worried that the ROK had lost some of the trust of the U.S. He outlined the three principles he thought the ROK should follow regarding North Korea: first, the ROK cannot accept a nuclear North Korea; second, if North Korea acts responsibly, they should be rewarded with aid, and if they act irresponsibly, there should be consequences; third, close cooperation with the U.S. and the international community should be paramount.

ENGAGEMENT: DEBATE?

¶4. (C) Sohn agreed that now was the time to debate the merits of the Sunshine Policy and the best way to conduct an engagement policy. He said he wished former President Kim Dae-jung had not recently spoken out in favor of continued engagement with the North. Instead, Kim should have come out strongly against the nuclear test by the North. If there were a firm response from the ROK, then moving back to engagement later would make sense. In all cases, it was important to define the purpose of any engagement with the North to encourage reforms and openness. The Ambassador noted he had met earlier in the year with former President Kim and Kim's private statements were more reasonable than some of his public statements.

NEW CABINET

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked Sohn if he thought the new Unification Minister designate, Lee Jae-jeong, would institute a change in policy toward North Korea. Sohn said Lee Jae-jeong had no special knowledge about unification issues and that Lee was "not a professional," and added that now MOU would play a less important role in the policy process. Sohn then asked the Ambassador what he thought of Song Min-soon as the Foreign Minister-designate. He mentioned that Song, before going to the NSC, was Sohn's foreign policy advisor in Gyeonggi Province. The Ambassador said Song had done many good things as National Security Advisor and previously as the Six Party Talks representative, but noted Song could benefit from being more careful about some of his public statements. With the new cabinet coming

in, Sohn said the main issue was that if Roh continued to attach a higher priority to North-South relations than to international cooperation, ROK diplomatic failures would continue to mount.

SIX PARTY TALKS

¶6. (C) The Ambassador explained the advantages of the Six Party Talks in comparison with bilateral talks, noting that each party had different forms of leverage vis-a-vis North Korea. The most important thing in the wake of the nuclear test was for North Korea to show through some early measures that it was ready to dismantle its nuclear program. The next round of the Six Party talks could not just be talk - there must be results.

¶7. (C) Sohn asked if the U.S. was more concerned with the proliferation of the North's nuclear technology than with eliminating its nuclear programs. The Ambassador said that the U.S. was equally concerned with stopping proliferation and dismantling the North's nuclear program. If the North dismantled its program, it would not be able to proliferate. There was a problem with the 1994 Agreed Framework, according to Sohn, since inspectors were only allowed into certain areas so the North simply developed their nuclear program in other places. The Ambassador agreed that the limited nature of the inspections under the Agreed Framework was one of its major flaws. This time, the North needed to open up for nation-wide inspections to assure the world that such deception could not occur again. If there are no early commitments by the North to allow inspections, we will know they are not serious about dismantlement.

THE "REAL TARGET" OF THE USG

¶8. (C) Sohn asked what the USG expected out of the ROKG in response to the DPRK's nuclear test. The Ambassador said we did not have specific demands but hoped that the ROK would decide to respond in a clear and strong manner, befitting a close ally. Even if the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) and

Mt. Kumgang projects continued, the ROKG could make adjustments to limit cash flows to the DPRK regime that could benefit its WMD programs, thereby sending a strong signal to the North.

UNSCR 1718-WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

¶ 19. (C) Sohn asked if there was any meaning to A/S Hill's statements that he preferred KIC to Mt. Kumgang. The Ambassador replied that A/S Hill's personal statements reflected the views of many who thought that KIC represented a means to promote internal change in the DPRK by exposing North Korean workers to capitalism, whereas Kumgang had little transformational effect.

PSI CONFUSION

¶ 10. (C) The Ambassador responded to Sohn's inquiry about PSI and said that participation in PSI did not require any specific actions -- each country could choose the scope of its involvement. PSI clearly did not equal war at sea as some Korean critics claimed. In addition, PSI was based on national and international law. The ROK could become a full participant by endorsing the PSI principles, but refrain from maritime interdictions. If the ROK decided not to participate fully, it could continue to be an observer.

FUTURE OF NORTH KOREA

¶ 11. (C) Sohn said the most important factor for the future of North Korea was the desire of China to continue to support the regime. Some experts say that even though China wants to maintain the KJI regime, transformation from within may occur either through a coup d'etat or collapse. The Ambassador said he hoped that at some point China decided that North Korea was becoming an excessive burden and would start to work to effect internal change. Sohn said that former

speaker of the Assembly Park Kwan-youn had told him that unification may come as a landslide after a sudden collapse in the North. He said many experts were expressing this view more and more. While a soft landing was preferable, collapse of the North had to be considered, the two agreed.

¶ 12. (C) President Bush cares deeply about the suffering of the North Korean people, the Ambassador said. The President wanted to use the Six Party Talks to encourage internal change and reform in the North. The challenge was to convince DPRK leaders that internal change was not the same thing as regime change.

SPY SCANDAL

¶ 13. (C) Turning to domestic politics, Sohn said that the recent arrest of five former student activists for suspected collaboration with a Korean-American spying for the North was a serious issue. He said that some on the left viewed the arrests as simple violations of the National Security Law while others claimed the detained former activists were, in fact, spies working for the North. Sohn said he felt that the former NIS Director Kim Seung-kyu operated independently and was forced out of his position due to his pursuit of the spy case.

PARTY SHAKE-UP

¶ 14. (C) Sohn said that former PM Goh Kun's November 1 announcement of plans to form a new, centrist reform party would receive zero support from the Grand National Party (GNP) and the overall prospects for the new party were dim. He said that while some Uri Party members wanted to switch to the GNP, it would be difficult. He said he expected lots of political turmoil and change in early 2007. In January, the

"game" would start in earnest and lots of moves remained until the December 2007 presidential election.

¶15. (C) In the GNP, Sohn said, support for former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak within the party was growing. Sohn was not optimistic about Park Geun-hye's chances to obtain the GNP nomination. Park had shown strong leadership as party leader, but was not seen as a national leader. He said Lee's strategy was to stay away from delicate issues such as North Korea and focus on building popular support.

U.S.-ROK RELATIONSHIP

¶16. (C) On the U.S.-ROK relationship, Sohn expressed concern that there were many in the ROKG who were emphasizing self-determination and that they wanted to take back OPCON from the U.S. as a sign of independence. Sohn said he was worried that this trend was eroding support for the ROK in the U.S. and asked what the ROK should do to change the perception that it wanted to "go it alone." The Ambassador said the most basic point was that the ROK should act like a real ally in the sense that, while we may argue over specific issues, we agree on fundamental principles and act in concert at key points, such as after the North Korea nuclear test. Solidarity in crucial times was the key to building trust. Now, as the alliance becomes a more balanced partnership with the transfer of OPCON, the focus should be on the safe transfer of OPCON rather than on whether the transfer should occur.

U.S.-PRC RELATIONS

¶17. (C) Sohn asked if U.S.-PRC relations had changed as a result of the October 9 nuclear test. The Ambassador said that particularly since the July 5 missile launch China has exercised greater responsibility in seeking to influence North Korea to reverse course. The U.S.-PRC relationship has grown stronger as a result of the PRC's expanded role. Also, the recent agreement facilitated by China to resume the negotiations has validated the concept of Six Party Talks, in our view.

SOHN VISIT TO USC, WASHINGTON

¶18. (C) Sohn asked the Ambassador for his opinion on whether he should go to the United States to give a lecture at USC in December and then go on to Washington. The Ambassador supported a visit as an opportunity for Sohn to talk about the state of the U.S.-ROK relationship and learn how Korea is seen in the U.S. It's also a chance for Americans to get to know one of the 2007 presidential candidates in advance of the campaign.

VERSHBOW